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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000210

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2016

TAGS: PGOV PINR PHUM TU

SUBJECT: AKP: THE RIFTS WITHIN (A BREATH OF SCANDAL IN THE PM ADVISOR'S HOUSEHOLD)

REF: A. 03 ANKARA 3016

¶B. 04 ANKARA 348

¶C. 05 ANKARA 776

Classified By: Consul General Deborah Jones, E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Cuneyd Zapsu, independent businessman, senior advisor to PM Erdogan and founding member of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party), is no stranger to controversy. This time, however, his wife Beyza made the front pages, photographed praying in an Istanbul mosque January 20 with a group of women, shoulder to shoulder with men and conspicuously uncovered. This "scandalous" behavior -- not only from the perspective of pious AK Party members, but that of traditionalists as well -- dominated print and television media for days, as well as Istanbul society dinner conversation. So, too, did Cuneyd's publicized anguish over having to choose between his wife and his political ambitions. The fissures within Turkish society at large and in the AK Party were apparent. Many applauded Beyza's behavior as a breakthrough for women; others went so far as to speculate that this was staged by the PM as a "stalking horse" to test the limits of AK Party tolerance for religious freedom. Still others -- neither AK Party affiliated nor particularly pious, but nearly all men -- expressed concern that Beyza had publicly humiliated her husband. Cuneyd Zapsu commented to the Ambassador February 1 that he was proud that PM Erdogan has stood by him. End Summary.

Media Circus

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¶12. (C) For days on end following the January 20 Friday prayer episode, the Turkish media published a number of highly speculative hypotheses. They noted that Beyza Zapsu did not accompany the PM and her husband to Davos (she does not travel with him, as a matter of practice), and cited the close personal friendship Beyza and her husband enjoy with the PM and his wife (the latter covered) whom they've accompanied to Mecca on "umra" (the minor hajj). Some even speculated that this was a political trial balloon on the PM's part, testing the limits of AK Party members' tolerance for religious plurality. Recalling that Beyza had attended the American Board School in Uskudar, others speculated that this was a manifestation of American influence, and even that she was a secret Protestant missionary.

How Could She?

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¶13. (C) Of equal interest were Cuneyd's reported remarks, made in phone calls to various friends and eventually leaked to the press, that he'd been put in the difficult position of

having to choose between his wife and his loyalty to the Prime Minister. Despite its large population, Istanbul is a village when it comes to the "chattering classes," many of whom attended school together or have long-standing business connections. Whereas most of our female contacts applauded Beyza's courage and audacity and criticized her husband's lack of public support, many men, including Western-educated, non-practicing Muslims, expressed dismay at her lack of consideration for her husband's position and reputation. Male protesters stood guard in front of the mosque the following Friday to prevent a recurrence. The women did not return.

Why Did She Do it?

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¶4. (C) Beyza Zapsu, one of our close contacts, is a diminutive woman who speaks softly and who studiously has avoided the limelight and involvement in her husband's political activities. Her father, Nihat Boytuzun, is a prominent Istanbul businessman/entrepreneur who is notoriously secular and who remarked when asked about this incident, "I don't know much about religion, but I do trust my daughter to do the right thing." Whereas Cuneyd Zapsu's mother is known to be extremely conservative and has always covered, his spouse, Beyza, never covers and has described herself as a longtime student of Sufi Islam. She has neither sought to hide her beliefs and style of worship, nor to politicize them. (Note: While visiting Konya, we attended morning prayers at the mosque of Shams ed-Tabriz, the teacher of Turkey's most famous Sufi poet Rumi, or Mevlana. Beyza insisted on praying uncovered, together with the men in the lower section of the mosque. End note.) Throughout the controversy -- the endless talk shows, commentary by the

ISTANBUL 00000210 002 OF 002

Chairman of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate -- she has remained tranquil and uninterested in speaking to the press.

Leave the Family Alone!

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¶5. (C) The Prime Minister walked a fine line and found a formula to support his advisor: "Leave the family alone," he said. He blamed the media for invading the Zapsus' privacy, implying this matter should be dealt with at home. His message was supplemented by a reminder that such matters were addressed in the Koran, and by the Diyanet (the GOT's religious affairs directorate), but he was not drawn into criticizing Beyza Zapsu publicly. One Hurriyet columnist praised the PM after hearing he told Zapsu, "Don't worry, don't be saddened." Reportedly, the PM was not as light-handed in private. Zapsu noted to the Ambassador February 1 how awkward he felt about the incident, which had embarrassed PM Erdogan on a matter important to his constituency. Zapsu made clear that Erdogan had supported him out of loyalty, but was not happy about the matter.

Who's Behind it and Why?

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¶6. (C) Why Beyza Zapsu's prayer habits surfaced now is not entirely clear; this is not the first time she has celebrated Friday services uncovered, alongside men. One nasty element to the story is that photographers who snapped the January 20 photos reportedly blackmailed the young daughter of a woman who also prays with this group. According to this account, the daughter worked as a model prior to renewing her faith in Islam and the reporters threatened to print pictures of her, scantily clad, if she refused to identify Beyza in the mosque that Friday.

What's the Real Issue?

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¶7. (C) Comment: The various reactions to Beyza Zapsu's

uncovered prayers alongside the men underscore the many cultural and religious 'tugs' inherent in Turkey's conflicted cultural and political identities. Whereas many women supported her right to pray as she wished, and indeed applauded her independence in this regard, the reaction of many men -- including those having neither AK Party affiliation nor manifesting any particular religious bent -- suggests that the real debate is as much about women rejecting a subordinate role to their husbands as anything else. A final note: while Cuneyd Zapsu may have agonized over his wife's behavior in this case, he appears to have raised his three daughters to be as strong and independent as Beyza, and reportedly gives them the leeway to do as they please. End comment.

JONES